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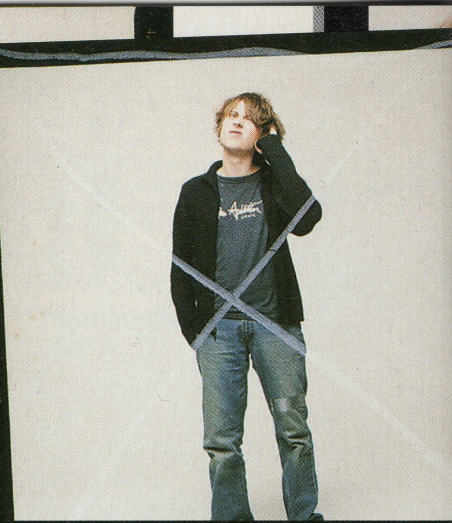
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The Lost Boy

CRAIG NICHOLLS COULD BE ROCK'S NEW SUPERSTAR. THAT'S IF THE PRESSURES OF FAME DON'T COST THE VINES' FRONTMAN HIS SANITY

WORDS: IAN WINWOOD PHOTOS: SCARLET PAGE

CRAIG NICHOLLS needs calming, some gentle, soothing reassurance. He's just had an unpleasant experience and now stands in a state of some agitation. It's Monday, February 16, the day before the Brit Awards, the day when every pop star worth their weight in platinum is to be found in the finest hotels in the nation's capital. Craig Nicholls is staying with his band at the Trafalgar Hotel, at the foot of the Square, next to Admiralty Arch. The transportation is taking him to The Worx, a studio in Parsons Green, where he will pose for his first Kerrang! cover shoot.

Only this being the week of the pop star, The Vines' vehicle (provided by a top line transportation firm) has been tailed by the paparazzi. They don't know who Craig Nicholls is, because what they're actually tailing is the vehicle itself, the photographers knowing the registration numbers of the firm's fleet. But Nicholls, to be fair, doesn't know this. He might have asked himself why it is he's being followed when really, in the conventional sense, he isn't all that famous – indeed, fresh from her appearance on a buttock-clenchingly awful episode of Channel 4's 'Faking It', his companion, Victoria 'Harry' Harrison is arguably more famous. But he doesn't. Instead he strops. He throws a Coke bottle at his pursuers and arrives at The Worx in a state of distress.

Finally calmed, he's led into the studio's main room. Kerrang! has two representatives here: Caroline Fish, the magazine's Art Editor, and photographer Scarlet Page. Fish holds out her hand and introduces herself. Nicholls ignores her completely, walking instead to the front of the camera

lens, this despite the fact that Scarlet Page is not yet *behind* the camera lens. Seeing that nothing is yet happening he walks back to Fish and says:

"I just want to tell you something. I think your magazine is shit."

Beat that for a first impression.

Standing before the camera, Nicholls runs through the repertoire of ridiculous faces he seems to pull in every photo shoot. As Scarlet Page snaps away, the singer momentarily looks serious.

"I just want to tell you something," he says. "I think your magazine is shit."

"Well," says Scarlet with a smile, "I think some of my photographs are good."

"No," says Craig Nicholls. "I think *your* photographs are shit."

Nice. As the other members of The Vines – bassist Patrick Matthews, guitarist Ryan Griffiths and drummer Hamish Rosser – take their turn in front of the camera, Nicholls assumes the role of a hyperactive child: opening and closing shutter doors, again and again; sitting on a bin until it breaks, not saying a word as he moves off it; throwing polystyrene light reflectors into the air, again, over and over; turning up the studio stereo so loud that no-one else in the room can hear themselves think. Making himself the unwanted centre of attention in what turns out to be a difficult and awkward session.

A session toward the end of which he's asked a question, out of nothing more than politeness: "Is there anything you want to do for some last shots, Craig?"

"I don't know," says Craig Nicholls, shrugging, twisting like a child. "It's not my job to think."





"IT AMUSES ME TO PISS
YOU OFF." CRAIG NICHOLLS

PERHAPS NOT. But if it's not Craig Nicholls' job to think, then it is his job to be thought of and talked about. Because soon The Vines are set to return with their second album, 'Winning Days', the follow-up to 2002's snappy 'Highly Evolved'. Advance word on the band's second album has been mixed, but perhaps that shouldn't matter, at least not yet. Less than two years ago The Vines were applauded in sections of the media with an intensity that would have you believe that here stood the heirs apparent to the bloodstained throne of Nirvana. Ridiculous, of course, but even an unkind ear would have regarded the band as at least an intriguing outfit brandishing a promising debut album. And plenty of people did. 'Highly Evolved' sold more than one-and-a-half million copies, its creators became 'Rolling Stone' cover stars and guests on 'Late Night With David Letterman', gathering a growing wave of momentum that's still behind them. Now they have a second album recorded, and the game of press, of promotion, of talking up a storm has begun.

And what a game The Vines are playing. The band are in town all week, and the week has not been without problems. Our interview was originally scheduled for the day of the band's photo shoot, but was cancelled because Nicholls was in "a state". It is rescheduled for the night of their show at Camden's Electric Ballroom... and blown out five minutes before we're due to start. Two days later the band play a promotional gig at the Islington Academy, and the interview is supposed to happen *that* afternoon, but – and you may be ahead of me here – doesn't. Finally, Sunday at the Trafalgar Hotel is suggested, and then confirmed.

And so it is that at 3:25pm I'm sitting in room 218 of this angular and hip hotel, waiting for Craig Nicholls to arrive. In just under three hours I'm off to the Royal Opera House to review Motörhead, the formal invitation to which decrees 'evening wear' for the occasion. So I'm wearing a suit and I'm feeling self-conscious. I'm also thinking about

Craig Nicholls, about the two years' worth of 'stuff' we know about him. About the time The Vines' US tour climaxed with an onstage fistfight between Nicholls and bassist Mathews. About the time during another interview when Nicholls grabbed the journalist's tape recorder and tore the tape from the machine. About the tales of tantrum, of torment, stories which might even suggest mental illness.

And just as you're wondering what on earth this man is going to be like, he walks in through the door.

SAT IN a chair Craig Nicholls appears almost doll-like in his frailty, a boyish whispishness wrapped in a fidgeting frame. His hair is catwalk tousled, his eyes like a dream. In a black canvas parka and Caucasian street wear he looks like a Gap model. His head tilts as if it were being controlled by remote control. It is always moving. He looks at his clothes, at the bed, at the walls and, very occasionally, at me. At first, Craig Nicholls is not at all what I expect.

It would be wrong to say he was friendly, but it would also be wrong to say he was unfriendly. The attention span needs work, as does the memory, or so he would have me believe. He can't remember the name of the neighbourhood in Sydney where he grew up, and he "thinks" he was born in 1977. He says he likes to travel but that it's confusing "not knowing where you are". I assume he means this in a figurative sense but, no, Craig Nicholls means that he has trouble remembering which city he's in. He was okay at school, he'll tell you, but better at the creative subjects over, say, "maths and science". He likes writing songs. He'll tell you that he doesn't know whether he likes doing interviews or not, doesn't know whether or not he's difficult ("I don't know what difficult is"), doesn't know what to say to my suggestion that his onstage persona, at The Vines' curiously lifeless Islington Academy show at least, gives the appear-

ance of someone who does not enjoy what they do ("You might be wrong. You might be right... You can write down whatever you like").

It is worth pointing out at this point that Craig Nicholls' quotes, at first, are all useless, almost to the point of being entirely nonsensical. Even the most fawning and subservient of interviewers would have difficulty accepting the yawn of stale air filling the room. During moments of the purest banality Craig Nicholls will cock his head to an angle and glide his eyes up to mine. Daring me to do... something. He'll smile in a way he believes to be damning, superior and sarcastic, but which actually appears petulant and sly. And he'll say things like, "I think what you do is insignificant". He'll say his outburst in The Worx on Monday was about integrity, about him thinking something "is shit and [trying to be] honest".

"And I have to tell you that I think what you do is shit as well," he'll say, the grin sliding open from the centre. "I have to be honest. What else can I be? Am I supposed to be a good little boy in a nice little rock band for you? So you can interview me and I can say, 'Thank you so much for putting me in Kerrap!'. Because that's what I think of it. And you can print that, in quotes. Kerrap! Kerrap! Kerrap!"

Craig Nicholls probably thinks he's the very first person to call this magazine 'Kerrap!'. He's not, but he seems uncommonly pleased with himself, like a small boy who's just discovered his own cock.

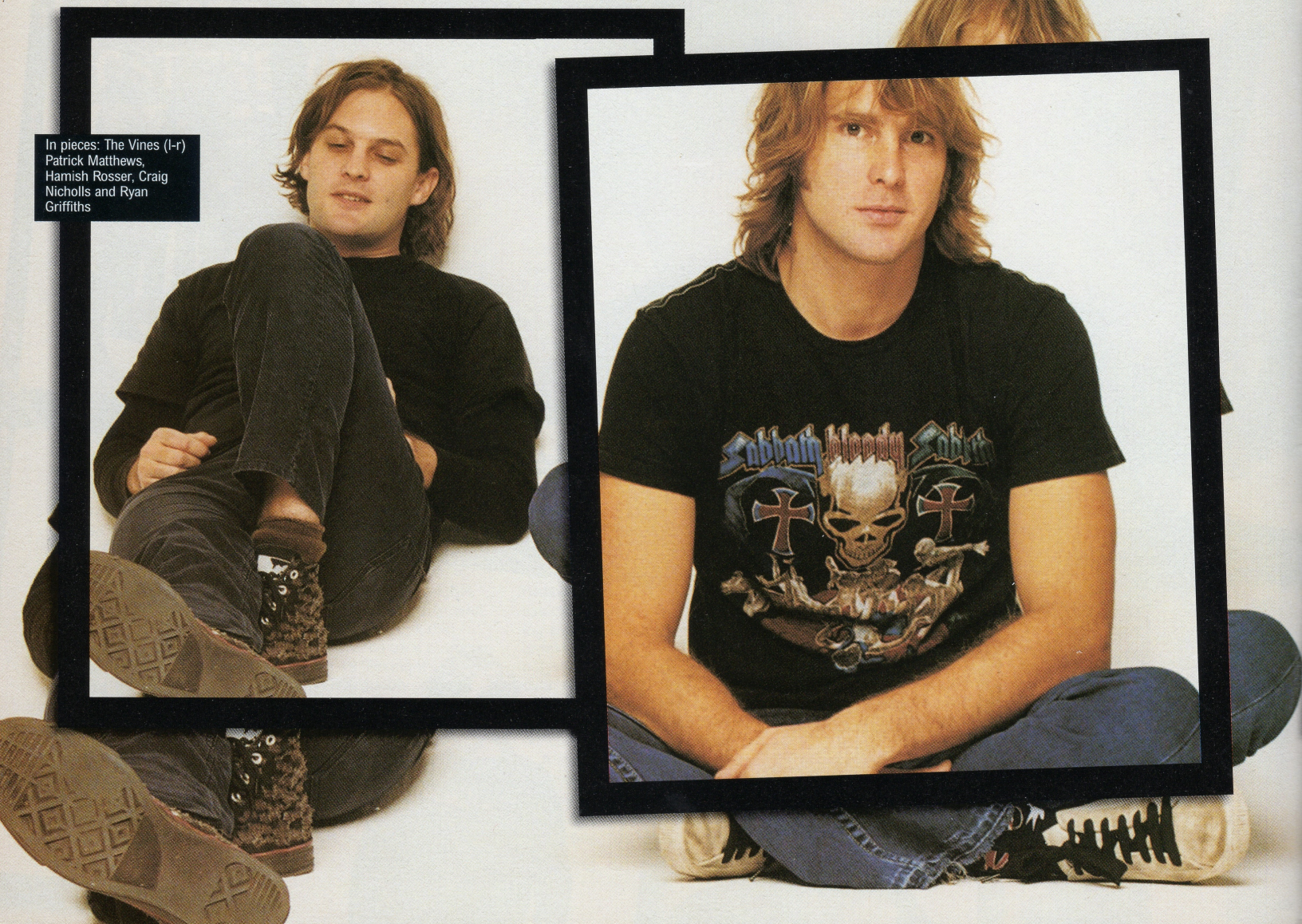
What does it matter what you think of the magazine?

And now Craig Nicholls is raising his voice.

"Well, you're interviewing me aren't you? You've just said that you want to hear what I think..."

And then the singer, the little darling, begins to say something, something that's difficult to hear, or understand. Something about structure. And you say, Structure to what? And he pauses for far too long and then, as if this were the smartest thing you will ever hear he says, "table cloths"

In pieces: The Vines (l-r) Patrick Mathews, Hamish Rosser, Craig Nicholls and Ryan Griffiths



Nicholls is asked why, if the magazine is so shit, he deigns to be interviewed for it and he says, "because it amuses me to piss you off." I assure him I'm not pissed off and he says, "I think you are." I tell him, in response, that what I *really* think is that his new album is, well, shit. And he says, "I'm gonna be, wow, really upset by [that]." He says that it must "hurt that you didn't say that first, before I told you that I think you're shit and your magazine is shit." He says that, "if you were a real man you would have told me the second I sat down." I mention common courtesy and not wishing to appear as rude as him.

"I didn't get in a band for fucking common courtesy, you dick," he snorts. "You're a fucking joke. The bands you put in your magazine with the tattoos... you're all a big joke. That's all you are."

LISTENING BACK to the tape after the interview it's difficult to believe this actually happened. But it did, and the transcript of what is basically a row lasts five whole pages. Questions and answers, barbs and insults. Him lolling his head and smiling that smile, the kind of smile that one day will surely get him hurt.

He eventually stops answering questions; not that he ever *really* answered the questions in the first place. In the end he's just talking, telling me I can do "whatever the fuck I want" when I ask him if he wants to talk about something else. Telling me he "doesn't fucking care" and that all this is "amusing".

But it isn't very amusing. It's just a bit sad.

"I don't care what you think," he says. "Look at you."

What do you mean, look at me?

"You look like you work in a bank."

And so I explain to Craig Nicholls, for the second time, that the reason I'm dressed like this is because of Motörhead, at the Royal Opera House. I tell him that normally I dress like him. I ask him if

this would make a difference, if this would make him less suspicious?

"You are really lame, man."

You're not answering my questions at all.

"Because your questions are pathetic. Your whole existence and what you are is lame."

Me personally?

"Yeah."

And then, after a bit more of this, Craig Nicholls walks out of the interview. Actually, 'walks out' might be a bit strong. He kinda, well, fops off, shambling gently away, walking as if he's keeping freshly laid eggs in the pockets of his trousers. Neck-deep in sarcasm Craig Nicholls tells me that he hopes "everything works out for me" and I tell him how nice it was to meet him.

And the door closes shut.

"**WOW, YOU** think. That doesn't happen every

"CRAIG IS UNCOMMONLY PLEASED WITH HIMSELF, LIKE A SMALL BOY WHO'S JUST DISCOVERED HIS OWN COCK."

day. And you stand in the silence of an empty and expensive hotel room, smiling and frowning. And you have a think about Craig Nicholls, and you try and find a word for how he was. Was he rude? Well, yeah, in a very random way. Was he offensive? No, he didn't actually manage to rise to that. Was he arrogant? Not a chance, the childish need to shock negated such singularity. So what was he? In both senses of the word, I guess, you'd say Craig Nicholls was *ignorant*.

And this doesn't really matter. Doesn't matter that he didn't like me, our Art Editor, our photographer, our magazine and – if you really want to push the point – you for buying and read-

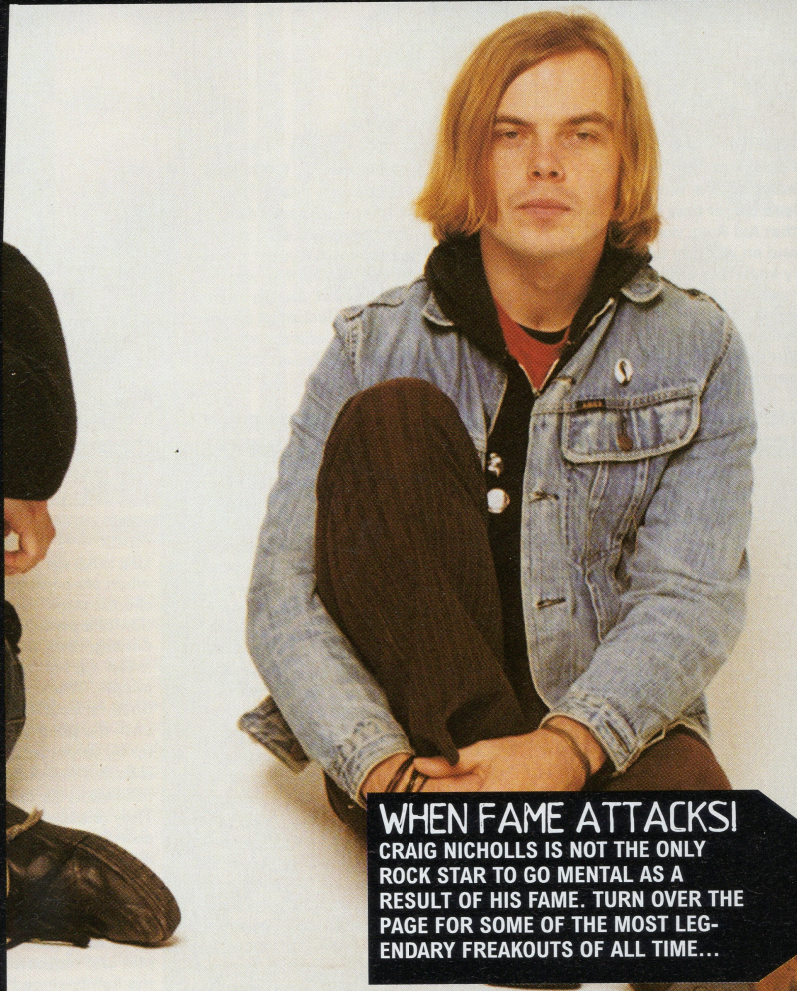
ing it. To expect him to be any different might be like expecting the cat to place its paw in front of its mouth when it yawns. But you do wonder what the point of all this might be.

Kurt Cobain, sometimes, sounded like he could be a proper pain in the arse in interviews. But Kurt Cobain was a brilliant, world-changing talent who changed the face of music, and Craig Nicholls is just a guy in a band who have actually sold less records than the likes of Disturbed or Crazy Town. And if you *really* don't want to play the dancing media monkey, you can always take the route that inspirational, industry-hating musicians Ian MacKaye or Fat Mike take, which is to choose your interviews carefully and then have something to say. Craig Nicholls has nothing at all to say, he just releases words in an unfocused, haphazard, grasping manner. And after a promising debut, The Vines are beginning to sound this way as well.

Craig Nicholls looks as if he can't be bothered, and so too do The Vines onstage at the Academy, him wrapped up in whatever it is he does, his audience shivering with boredom. Craig Nicholls speaks and you wonder what the point of it is; Craig Nicholls sings and you wonder what the point of it is.

Because a half an hour in his company is to see a man sit cheap, ephemeral and thin. Not really a problem, just a waste of time. ■

THE VINES' NEW SINGLE 'RIDE' IS OUT ON MARCH 8 THROUGH EMI.



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